

## Coming Home

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah –  
G'mar Chatimah Tovah

By now, I am sure you have noticed the baseball themed high holiday homework, and the curiously thought provoking baseball diamonds at the entrances to the Sanctuary and Tent – this is because we are so grateful that all of you – whether you are here in person or virtually have decided to “come home for the holidays”. That you have decided to affirm that Adath Israel – but really that being a part of a Jewish community – is something that has value in your lives. That this place – and the things we do here – are part of you – are in some way – “home.”

Growing up – the concept of Home was very concrete for me. I had the privilege of growing up in the same house that my mother grew up in... the same house my parents still live in as a matter of fact. Three generations of my family lived and loved in that home. My childhood bedroom was my mother's childhood bedroom, our basement and garage full of things leftover from my mother's childhood– and my own. The cabinets in the kitchen were even the same... still are. So when I think about it – there is something eternal – something unchanging – something so very precious about HOME. About coming home – about being home – about being with the people in the place that in so many ways made me the person I am today. I still have vivid dreams that take place in my childhood home – because it is a place that is foundational to who I am – and to who I want to strive to become.

The concept of home is extremely important and fraught in the Jewish tradition. Baked into our idea of home is the fact that we existed – survived and occasionally thrived — for close to two millenia without a place to call home. The entire project of Zionism was envisioned to rectify that great tragedy of history – to return the Jewish people to their homeland – to finally be able to lay claim to the fact that we have a place in this world.... Because having a home –

knowing where you came from is vital to knowing where you are going. Yehudah Amichai Z”L, the great Israeli poet once remarked that –

"A person leaves the home, but the home      האדם יוצא מבית והבית אינו יוצא  
does not leave a person" (Yehudah Amichai)      מן האדם" (יהודה עמיחי)

You see, just because we grow up, move out – go to college and experience the world – doesn’t mean that we also shed the experiences and values that we were taught in our homes. In fact, I would venture to say that the world has a habit frequently of reinforcing those values – of confirming the things we were taught in our youth. It is rare – so rare for us to encounter something that shatters our worldview – that removes us from the comforts of home.

I want to take a minute before moving on to acknowledge that “*home*”, for some of us, is not so simple. For many, home is not comfortable, relatable, predictable. For some, home is not safe. “Home” does not need to be a physical house, does not need to be where you’re from or where you grew up. Home can be our safe space, or our safe person, however that manifests. Home is the place where we start from, that informs our values and how we move through life. Home is wholly and holy our own. And if home for you isn’t “home”, that’s okay. It still counts. It’s still holy.

If we consider it a little bit more, however; there is a certain tenuousness when it comes to home. Just like Yehuda Amichai said – we leave home. We relocate from our childhood home, we head off to college, we grow into adults who have to figure out how to make a home for the first time. And sometimes – well sometimes our home is taken from us. We may lose a home to debt or violence. Our ancestors know a little something about being forced from home. And while distance from home can be traumatic, sometimes it’s actually just what we need.

This is best illustrated in the opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible – in *Bereshit* chapters 2 & 3 – we first learn about the beauty and the grandeur of the Garden. The ideal HOME for humanity – a place without want – a place without need – a place where we could have lived in the lap of luxury and remained blissfully

ignorant of the pain and suffering of the world ... And yet that was never meant to be. That's not how life works. Humanity was destined to be thrown out of the Garden. To lose that paradise. To have to figure out how to make the real world work and strive to regain that which was lost. Just like Adam and Eve, we are destined to lose our homes of origin. We are destined to lose our innocence. But we are NOT destined to lose ourselves. Home is representative of that ideal state – the time before we knew how hard life can be – and simultaneously – it is a taste of olam ha-bah – of what life could be, if we were to join together to make the world an Eden once again. Home, in a very real way – is both what was lost and bursting full of the potential of what could... or ought to be... The question remains how we achieve... or obtain what we lost.

And yet - sometimes – sometimes – home is the place that we rebel against. Sometimes home is how we define what we DON'T want in our lives moving forward. Not everyone has a homelife full of light, laughter, and love. Sometimes the values we want to put into the world as we create our homes are defined precisely in opposition to the ways in which we were raised. I think of my father, who was disciplined harshly in his home as a child. Corporal punishment was something that he experienced fairly regularly... and yet – because of this – from a young age – he **knew** that he would **never** lay a hand on his future progeny. I was blessed to live in a home where physical punishment for my mistakes/transgressions was off the table... a home in which my father vowed to never cause me such pain. That the home – the world that he sought to build for me was one without the trauma from his own childhood. That courage – that bravery – that rebellion against his own upbringing was probably difficult . He had to figure out how to parent me in a wholly new way – unlike what he had previously known. He had to forge a new path – and hopefully bring us a little bit closer to a new and better home– to Eden. So too – do we see this echoed in our tradition – when – God Spoke to our ancestor, Avram – and said –

**Genesis 12:1**

בראשית י"ב:א'

Adonai said to Avram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוֹק אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ  
מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית  
אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה:

God commands Avram – to go and leave everything that he knew – everything that he held dear. To go and abandon the way he was raised – so that his children might inherit a better world. Avram knew that something about the way that his family of origin was doing things wasn’t quite right – wasn’t the way that he wanted the world to be. He left his home in order to start the process of building something better, something new for his descendants. So I want to take a moment to thank all of the builders of homes who seek to undo – or fix – or even just circumvent the mistakes made in their homes of origin. Sometimes the homes we need to build serve as *tikkunim* – fixes – as a means to right the wrongs that we, ourselves experienced.

Home looks different for many people. Some seek to replicate their homes of origin, others seek to improve upon it, while still others seek to replace it. But what is it that we are after? What are we working towards? What is the ideal “home”? It is one that shields us – but also equips us with the tools necessary to live our best lives. It allows us to self actualize – giving us the mechanisms we need to grow and prosper in the world. To explore our values and enact them outside the home. Our tradition is explicit on this point – we are required to have conversations with our co-inhabitants – our families and friends – about the things that matter in this world. We are reminded by the words of the *V’Ahavta* paragraph –

### Deuteronomy 6:7

דברים ו:ז

Repeat these lessons to your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבְךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ  
בָּם בְּשֹׁכֶתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ  
וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכֶבְךָ  
וּבְקוּמְךָ:

The homes we build as Jews must be filled with conversations about what it means to be Jewish – what it means to be a good person – what it means to build a home. If we aren’t actively talking about what our values are with our

children – if we aren't sharing our values with them and encouraging them to explore what's important to them in order to form their own sense of the world – then we are failing as parents and role models. What's more – talking is only half the battle – we need to actually **live** those values. To inhabit more than just the conversations – we need to truly enact and demonstrate for our children, those around us – and ultimately ourselves, that we actually believe in the values we say we subscribe to. This is clear from the opening passages of Pirkei Avot –

### Pirkei Avot 1:4

משנה אבות א':ד'

Yose ben Yoezer used to say: let your home be a home of meeting for the Sages and sit in the very dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.

יוסי בן יועזר איש צרדה אומר, יהי ביתך בית ועד לחכמים, ונהוי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם, ונהוי שותה בצמא את דברייהם:

Now I am not saying that you need to invite me or Rabbi Yanoff over for dinner every night. Although – I wouldn't complain. (*pause for laughter*) Rather I think it's important for us to acknowledge the fact that if we aren't having the important conversations about what matters at home – and we aren't living our values there – then we are failing. We are failing to live up to our full potential as actualized human beings. We are failing to be good role models. We are failing to be good Jews. We are failing to be intellectually and emotionally honest – we are failing at making our homes safe spaces for ourselves and our children to explore the world – to ask questions – to be right and to be wrong. Let me be clear – **it is ok to fail**. We all do it, from time to time. Failure is as much a part of life as success (maybe more...) What is NOT ok is to fail to learn from our missteps and mistakes. That is what this season is about. We need to make our homes places where we can own our whole selves – where we can challenge and struggle – laugh and to learn. Our homes need to be the place where it is ok to not be ok. Where it is safe to hurt. Where we can be vulnerable with one another and not fear rejection. Where we can offer our whole, holy self and know that it will be accepted.

What's more it needs to be a place of relationship. A place of bonds – of connection. The only way we know that it is safe, that we can express our true and authentic selves there is precisely BECAUSE we are in a deep relationship with the people that inhabit that space. The ancient rabbis understood this—albeit in a rather gendered, euphemistic – and potentially misogynistic way—

### Shabbat 118b:10

שבת קי"ח ב"י

Rabbi Yosei said that he always spoke אמר רבי יוסי: מימי לא euphemistically: **In all my days, I did not call my קריתי לאשתי "אשתי" wife, my wife... Rather, I called my wife, my אלא לאשתי — "ביתי", home, because she is the essence of the home...**

While it can be said that this text is limiting and reductionist regarding the role of a wife... and I see that, I want to offer that we read it in a much more endearing way. That our spouses – our partners – our children – our family – our loved ones – THEY ALL are the essence of what it means to have a home. That the ideal of “home” – while represented by a physical structure – is in its essence about relationships. It's about knowing that there are people in your corner. No matter what. That we all are loved for who we are. That there are people in this world who want to help us strive to make ourselves and the world better. In short – that we are part of something larger than ourselves – that we are a part of a community.

Home is more than just our residences – it is a manifestation of our values, it is an embodiment of the smallest unit of community – the family, whether by blood or by choice. However we, as Jews, can find that feeling of home and belonging not just in the four walls of our houses – but also in our synagogues – our places of gathering. The Hebrew word for Synagogue is *Beit K'nesset* – or Home/House of Gathering. It is literally understood to be the embodiment of home for the entire the Jewish community. What's more, it is understood to be

the home of something even greater than the sum total of all the present – it is meant to be the place where we dwell with God... At the end of the book of Exodus – as the Israelites are finally free from bondage – the first thing that God asks of them is –

Exodus 25:8	
וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם:	And let them make God a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

Now that the Jewish people are free – they are tasked with building a physical representation of the relationship they have with the Divine. Imagine it – just as the chuppah represents the home that the newly married couple will one day build – the physical embodiment of their relationship and love – so too does the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, serve as the embodiment of our relationship with the Divine... or– inversely – God’s relationship with us. We are commanded to build a home for God. A place for the Jewish people to be in and cultivate a deep and intimate relationship with the world, the Divine, and... maybe most importantly the rest of the Jewish community. The synagogue, as the modern manifestation of the experiment that began in the desert all those millennia ago – is the home of the Jewish people and God. It is the place where we are invited to “come home” – to be present – to have conversations of import – to feel safe, and be held – to feel like we can offer our vulnerabilities. In its ideal form – the synagogue is the place where we can laugh, cry and everything in between. Where we can learn and challenge our beliefs and practices. It’s the place where we can safely rebel and ask “why” without fear of reproach or judgment. It is a place where we go to be in deep relationship with God, the Jewish people... and ourselves.

And that’s a hard ask. In order to make a place feel like home – we have to **inhabit** it. We have to be familiar with every nook and cranny, comfortable with every bump and blemish. Sometimes the process of making a place feel like home is uncomfortable. And there is much to learn from such discomfort. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski Z”L – a hasidic rabbi, teacher, and self help advocate

– once taught that we should seek to be like a lobster. Now, I know what you are thinking – “But rabbi... Lobster isn’t kosher.” You are right. I’m not saying we should **eat** lobster, rather that we should strive to **be** like the lobster. Why? Because whenever a lobster grows – it first needs to push against its shell. Causing small fissures, small cracks... and we can only assume that this process is... let’s call it uncomfortable for the lobster. And yet – when it is done going through that growth process, behold – it has grown. It has moved through the discomfort, and maybe – pain – of growing beyond its previous limitations. The gaps fill in... and new ones form as it continues its growth... as its shell... its home – gains new dimensions. As it claims a little more space for itself in this world.

I want to invite each of us to **claim the space that is rightfully ours** in this world. Maybe even challenge each of us to push ourselves beyond the limit of where and how we understand our “home” to be. My friends, homes are **made**. They aren’t a given. There are literal blood, sweat, and tears that go into building a home and metaphorical blood, sweat, and tears that go into making a place feel like home. Anyone who has ever moved cross country or even down the street can tell you – claiming a space in this world takes work. And yet – it has the potential to be some of the most rewarding work a person can do in their lifetime. Because it is in that real work that we have the power to shape the world around us. To leave a legacy... Amos Oz Z”L – the great Israeli author once remarked –

"A person builds his house and yard	" אדם בונה את ביתו ואת חצרו
according to the pattern of his personality, or	על פי תבנית אישיותו או שאדם
a person builds his house and yard according	בונה את ביתו ואת חצרו על פי
to the image of his dreams and the desires of	דמות חלומותיו ומשאות נפשו
his soul" (Amos Oz)	(עמוס עוז)

In coming home to Adath Israel – to our community – our spiritual home – we have the capacity to shape the world according to our values – our dreams – our desires. There is **such potential** in the gathering of our community – physically



– and spiritually – to do more – to be more than we already are. In the walls of this sacred space we have the opportunity to actualize our best selves. To create spaces of learning – of growth – of vulnerability – of struggle – and ultimately of meaning. But we... I, can't do it without you. Our home can't be our home without your hopes, your dreams – your vision for what a deep relationship can and should be. We are weaker without the Torah – the wisdom – the presence of each and every person here today. We need you. I need you. God needs you. Help us grow and make this holy community and synagogue more than just a shul – help us fill it with all of this and more – help us make it Home.

This is work that all of us are doing right here and right now – each of us – each of you – has decided to COME HOME to Adath Israel for the holidays. And for the past few hours (days) we have been doing the work of the High Holidays together. We have begun the process of reacclimating to this space – the beautiful Mandell Sanctuary – and to one another – after two very very hard years. Never before have we needed home more than we do now. Never before has the opportunity been so ripe to help shape and mold our community moving forward. Never before has the potential for home been so sweet – so present.

For Y"K:

In just a few moments – we will enter into the Yizkor service. We will have the opportunity to pay tribute and homage to those who did the work of making the world home for us. To be present for our lost loved ones. To remember the souls and individuals who embraced us despite and sometimes because of our blemishes. To remember those whose homes we inhabited in our youth – whose actions taught us for good and for bad how to be in this world. We are tasked with building our homes... our world based on what we inherited from our loved ones. We are their legacy, their continued home on this earth. And the memories we have of our family and friends form the basis for the homes that

we are currently and continuously building. And yet this process is painful — as Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the great scholar of death and mourning teaches —

“The reality is that we will grieve forever. We will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; We will learn to live with it. We will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss(es) we have suffered. We will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”

— Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler

My bracha for all of us — as we enter into 5783 — is that we might merit the ability to craft homes in this world that allow us to actualize our best selves and honor our lost loved ones. That we acknowledge the ways in which we have changed because of what we have lost — and how we can affirm the values of our departed loved ones. That we find, or better yet, make our community our homes — places where everyone feels comfortable, welcome, and safe. A place where everyone and anyone can feel at home. A place that honors the memories of our dead loved ones and creates space for continued growth in our lives — new relationships — new memories. Ken Yehi Ratzon. Amen. G’mar Chatima Tovah.

For RH 1:

In that vein, let us harvest that sweetness – let us embark on a spiritual journey of growth, reflection, and praise together – In just a moment we will engage in the *avodah* – the holy work of transforming this place – and this community into home. Just as we are reminded that home is the embodiment of our ideals – our hopes, dreams and values – so too do we hope, dream and pray that God will, in turn, embrace this Holy community. That our prayers of Malchuyot/Zichronot/and Shofarot – our pleas of help, will be heard in the Divine realm in the way that they are intended. That we are able to reconcile any misunderstandings, missteps, or missed opportunities that we made in the past year with the homes we wish that we had built. And that the homey relationship that we share with each other and the Divine be reinforced in the year to come. We pray that in 5783 we are able to not only stretch ourselves to grow into ways of being at home – but that we are also able to invite others in as well. We pray that this holy community and God will accept us... with all of our imperfections – all of our blemishes – all of the bumps and bruises that we have collected over the course of this year. And that we are able to buttress one another – and hold each other up as we encounter the Divine all in a deep homey relationship.

My bracha for all of us – that we might merit the ability to craft homes in this world that allow us to actualize our best selves. That we find, or better yet, make our community a place where everyone feels comfortable, welcome, and safe. A place where everyone and anyone can feel at home. Ken Yehi Ratzon. Amen. Shanah Tovah